Is the Battleship Obsolete? The British Ask

By W. P. CROZIER

Manchester, England, January—(By Mail).

THE United States is building capital ships—battleships and battle cruisers. Japan also is building them. England has not laid down any since the armistice. Such ships now cost several million pounds apiece and, if built at all, would probably be built in squadrons of four. We are already groaning desperately beneath the burden of taxation at the very time when we are in the trough of trade depression. There is a strong movement afoot for state and personal economy. The estimated government expenditure for this year is £1,200,000,000 and for £800,000,000 in any "normal" year, whenever that may come. It has already been proposed in the House of Commons that the government next year should be restricted to the "normal" expenditure of eight hundred millions and the government retorts that if such a limit were imposed it would not be able to provide for the defense of the country on the sea, on land or in the air.

From all this it will be evident that this country is far from desiring to embark on a program of battleship construction—one uses battleships as a convenient term to include battle cruisers—because the present taxation is grinding down the middle classes and hampering industry, and a battleship program means an addition to taxation of many millions. Of course, if the admiralty and the government say deliberately that post-Jutland battleships are necessary, the country will provide them whatever the cost, but at the moment we are not sure that they are necessary. It is a strong point that both the United States and Japan are building them, for only a very foolish man would suggest that those great powers are doing anything but applying promptly and betimes what they hold to be the unquestionable lesson of the war—that the battleship is still, despite airplane and submarine, the ultimately decisive weapon on the sea.

To tell the truth, there is no doubt that the major opinion of our own sea lords at the admiralty believes the United States to be right. "Let it be granted," they would say, "that airplanes and submarines have incalculable possibilities in them and that we do not know what they may or may not achieve at the beginning of the next war. Nevertheless, we are not concerned with the outbreak of a war at some dim and distant date but with the conditions which would prevail if a fresh war were to break out next month or next year and, on that hypothesis, we maintain that the country possessing the superior battleship fleet would control the seas and win the war."

On the other hand, there is in England a section of sailors and airmen who had long and active experience during the war, which holds very strongly that the day of the battleship is over, that it can achieve little or nothing in the next war; and that our available funds will be spent to much better purpose on great swarms of small craft—airplanes (and airplane carriers) submarines and torpedo craft of every sort. Now the ordinary citizen, being disappointed so far of all hope of disarmament, will pay what he is told by his betters he ought to pay for naval defense. But emphatically he does not want to pay another fifty or a hundred millions for battleships unless his betters are quite sure that these are the right thing for the purpose and, learning from the controversy that is now raging here that his betters are far from being unanimous, he is relieved to learn that the government, before taking its decision, is laying the whole question before the Committee of Imperial Defense—which means the most important cabinet ministers advised by the chief military and naval authorities that we possess. If the committee summons before it the sailors who do not believe in the battleship—Lord Fisher was their prophet and chief, as Sir Percy Scott is now—then we shall at least have some security, even if at the finish we do build battleships, that our money is not being wasted, and that our safety is not thoughtlessly endangered.

One word about the battleship programs of the United States and Japan. Public opinion here does not disquiet itself about either the one or the other. Of course the Pacific is a remote ocean to the Englishman. The "menace" of the French fleet a hundred years ago and of the German fleet in the years before 1914 was close and insistent and the Englishman never for one moment allowed it to escape his mind. But the fleet of Japan does not worry him, although he has no comparable force in the Pacific wherewith to meet it and Lord Fisher prophesied openly that the Pacific was the battleground of the next war. (Singapore is now held by this school to be the great "strategic center" for England.) The average Englishman (unlike the Australian) does not think of Japan as an aggressive, threatening power in the Pacific, but if he did he would probably come to the conclusion that there was one country which was much more competent than his own to handle the situation—I mean the United States.

The American Navy excites in the Englishman as yet no envy and no hostility. Whether rightly or wrongly, it is now accepted as a commonplace here that there neither are nor will be any differences between England and America which could lead to war. We do not regard such a thing as coming within the bounds of practical politics. The ordinary man expresses this point of view by attributing the American naval program broadly to the necessity of keeping an eye on Japan and the future peace and freedom of the countries fronting on the Pacific Ocean. This is not, I imagine, by any means an adequate appreciation of the motives of American policy, for Mr. Wilson made it clear long ago that the America of the future, failing all other remedies, must have a fleet sufficient to protect her own interests, as representing those of all neutrals, against the encroachments of belligerents in a great war. One of his objects at Paris was to establish firmly the "freedom of the seas" (which the Germans always said had been suppressed by British "navalism") and he only abandoned his plans when, as he said himself, he discovered that in a comprehensive League of Nations there would be no neutrals whose interests could be injured by the belligerents, for there would be on one side the offenders against the Covenant of the League and on the other, vindicating its authority, the whole of the remaining members of the League.

But while we are sure that at any rate we shall not build against America, League or no League, our trouble is to know what sort of ships we are to build. What are the principal arguments against the battleship? The first is that submarines will increase so rapidly in size and speed and armament, that before long they will be not submarines but large submersible cruisers, armed like a dreadnought and able to cruise round the world. They will be able to fight a battleship from under the water, but the battleship will not be able to fight them; when it comes on them and seeks to open battle, they will submerge and disappear. They will be much more formidable than they have ever been because already they are beginning to make use of wireless when submerged—which they could not do in the late war—so that they will shortly be able to concert plans with one another and receive instructions and information while still concealed beneath the water.

Our Admiral Sturdee, who defends the battleship, inquires scornfully whether any other ships could have sunk Von Spee and his squadron as he sank them with his two battle cruisers at the Falkland Isles. "Pooh!" say the anti-battleship sailors, "that was all very well for the last war, but when the next war comes, a Von Spee would simply submerge with all his ships and of what use, pray, would your battle cruisers be then? They would wander helplessly on the surface of the waters until Von Spee destroyed them. The only weapons that in the next war will be of any use against raiding cruisers like Von Spee's will be the airplane and the fast submersible." They might add that even these weapons will be of limited value in the vast spaces of the world's seas and on their endless trade routes. The Sydney sank the German raider Emden. But how long a life might the Emden have enjoyed had she had the power to submerge and reappear! For the submersible possesses the great twin attributes, which never change, of military success—power of invisibility and the power of effecting a surprise.

It is easy now to see the retort which these sailors would make to anyone who complains that other powers are building battleships and we are not. "Let them build!" is the answer. "Multiplying enormously our submarines and submersible cruisers, our mine-layers and airplanes, we shall pen their battleships in harbor or, if they come out, we shall assail them with all these weapons of ours from our nearest bases, wherever they may be. If our principal object is to protect our over-sea commerce, food supply and so forth, it is not their battleships that we fear, but their use of the same weapons that we ourselves possess—their submarines, airplanes and mines. We believe that we can develop the under-water and the over-water weapons to such a degree that we shall be able to regard the battleship as almost negligible."

But by many seamen here the airplane is rated even more highly than the submarine. They say that in a war between England and France no battleship would be left in a few days in a French port; that in a war between England and a revived Germany, no English fleet would be safe in any base from overhead attack. The enemy force would consist of flying-boats which could rest on the sea and rise up from their temporary base at the appropriate time or of airplanes which would be borne on "carriers" equipped with the maximum of speed. A modern naval base, to be secure, will need a roof. A fleet, to be secure against destruction, will need a great array of attendant airplanes to meet and beat off the attack. Even the most generous provision of that kind cannot absolutely guarantee security, for the deadliness of the airplane lies in its extreme mobility. The enemy can assemble large numbers secretly and quickly and throw them suddenly against any chosen point. They will effect a surprise by the swiftness of their coming and the numbers with which they come, whereas the strength of the defense will be for the moment a fixed quantity and the mischief may be done before the necessary reinforcements can be brought up from elsewhere. No, whatever may be said for the battleship, there is no doubt that wherever it is within practicable range of the bases of the enemy—and the range is constantly extending—it will be exposed to most dangerous attacks from the super-airplanes of the next age. That will be the case with all the great European powers. It will not be true to the same degree of the United States and Japan, which are separated from Europe and each other by much greater distances.

On the other hand, the advocates of the battleship have one great argument in their favor. They assert that during the late war the submarine never inflicted any loss on a battleship squadron steaming in formation and properly escorted by cruisers and light craft. That is true. There were reports of submarines at Jutland and elsewhere and of course a good many cruisers and old battleships were torpedoed on patrol or at anchor, but when the great battleship was in its full war paint, steaming fast with its due escort and protection, it was immune from injury by submarine. Nor was any battleship sunk or seriously injured by airplane.

The defenders of the battleship are entitled to make capital out of this immunity and it is not a very damaging retort to say, as the other side does, that the German submarines had orders to attack commerce and to leave the enemy battleships severely alone. The security actually enjoyed by the battleships was in fact so great that at the present moment it is reasonable to say that it can still stand up against its small assailants and therefore (in the case of England) that it can defeat any attempts at raids, not to speak of definite invasion. But could it do so in five or ten or fifteen years' time? Picture the harbor of Brest or Cherbourg assailed by hundreds of British airplanes or Portsmouth and Dover attacked by swarms from France! The position of the battleship would be—shall we say?—uncomfortable.

No doubt what will first happen will be a battle royal between the belligerents for the "control of the air," but control of the air is not to be so easily nor so definitely established as that of the seas, for the output of airplanes will be so rapid and enormous that supremacy will be partial and temporary and will pass from one side to another. Of one thing we may be certain, that in countries whose harbors are comparatively close to one another—that is, who can "get at" each other—the battleships of the future will eventually have to have the power of protecting themselves: they will have to be submersible. That may very possibly prove to be true of the ships of all powers, however remote.

It is a discouraging business, this of speculating only about types of warships, as though the old world were unchanged and unchangeable, as though we looked forward still to the "inevitable" wars and the endless competition in armaments which accompanies them. Americans may say that Europe at least shows few signs of change of heart and that America cannot be blamed if she frames a policy that befits the war-spirit of the conquering states of Europe. True, and yet there are many in Europe who are waiting for some power to make the appropriate gesture, to propose boldly a measure of disarmament. It could be done now and it could be done by any one of the great powers that believes with sufficient sincerity in the idea of a peaceful community of nations. It is not opportunity but will that we all lack. Of course the proposal might fail. But better to have tried and failed than never to have tried at all. And indeed the effort would not be lost, but would be taken up again and repeated with a more powerful moral appeal. Has Mr. Wilson a successor in the United States, or elsewhere?

Teaching a City How to Play

ROWLAND HAYNES

His is the job of teaching all of Cleveland, Ohio, which means school children, young people, grown-ups, even the grandfathers and grandmothers of that city how to make the most of their recreation hours, and such a task cannot be accomplished in a few months. Mr. Haynes has a ten-year program mapped out. By the end of that time he expects Cleveland to have started on its career of play, to be a model for all other cities in the United States. The picture shows Mr. Haynes and some of the kiddies he has inspired with the play spirit.